

## Message Text

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S E C R E T STATE 301411 TOSEC 320205

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS:MPOL, PINS, PFOR, LE, SY, IS

SUBJECT: ISRAELI AND SYRIAN INTERESTS IN SOUTH LEBANON

1. IN VIEW OF STRONG ISRAELI OPPOSITION TO THE MOVEMENT OF ANY ELEMENTS OF THE ARAB SECURITY FORCE SOUTH OF THEIR PRESENT POSITIONS NEAR SIDON, IT IS IMPORTANT TO TAKE A LOOK AT WHAT MAY BE THE REAL ISRAELI CONCERN. THE ISRAELIS SEEM PRIMARILY CONCERNED THAT THE CONSOLIDATION OF SYRIA'S POSITION IN LEBANON, PARTICULARLY IF EXTENDED INTO THE BORDER AREA IN THE SOUTH, WOULD ADD SUBSTANTIALLY TO THE STRENGTH OF SYRIA'S POSITION IN THE PEACE PROCESS. IN OUR VIEW, HOWEVER: (1) THE EXTENSION OF THE SYRIAN ROLE TO SOUTHERN LEBANON WOULD NOT SIGNIFICANTLY ENHANCE SYRIA'S POSITION IN THE NEGOTIATING CONTEXT; (2) FAILURE TO STABILIZE SOUTHERN LEBANON AND BRING THE PALESTINIANS UNDER CONTROL THERE COULD UNDERCUT SARKIS' EFFORTS TO RESTORE CENTRAL AUTHORITY AND LEAD TO A RENEWAL OF PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI WARFARE ACROSS THE BORDER.

2. THE FIRST ISRAELI STATEMENTS ON SOUTHERN LEBANON WERE  
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IN TERMS OF PREVENTING COMMANDO ATTACKS ACROSS THE BORDER, AND THE CHIEF OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE OPERATIONS RECENTLY HAS SAID, IN ADDITION, THAT THE ISRAELIS DO NOT WANT TO BUMP INTO ARAB FORCES IF THEY FEEL IT NECESSARY TO

CROSS THE BORDER AND ATTACK THE PALESTINIANS. NOW THEY SAY THAT THIS IS ONLY A SECONDARY CONCERN -- THAT THE ENTRY OF ARAB FORCES, EVEN IF THE SYRIANS WERE EXCLUDED, INTO SOUTH LEBANON WOULD HAVE FAR-REACHING POLITICAL AND MILITARY CONSEQUENCES. THESE CONSEQUENCES, THEY NOW TELL US, WOULD BE EVEN GREATER THAN THE RISK OF A RESUMPTION OF PALESTINIAN TERRORIST ACTIVITY ACROSS THE BORDER. THE QUESTION IS: WHAT IS THEIR REAL OBJECTIVE IN TRYING TO PREVENT SARKIS, WITH SYRIAN HELP, FROM RESTORING CONTROL OVER SOUTHERN LEBANON?

3. ISRAELI INTERESTS: THE ISRAELI ATTITUDE REFLECTS GENUINE CONCERNS. THE ISRAELI BORDER WITH LEBANON INDEED IS VULNERABLE, SINCE IT IS CLOSE TO ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS AND HAS NO NATURAL DEFENSIVE LINE OR DMZ TO PROTECT IT. EXTENSION OF ISRAELI DEFENSIVE POSITIONS IN THE NORTH OF ISRAEL TO COPE WITH THIS THREAT WOULD ALSO PLACE AN ADDITIONAL MILITARY AND ECONOMIC BURDEN ON ISRAEL.

4. ON THE WHOLE, HOWEVER, THE POSITION THE ISRAELIS ARE TAKING CANNOT BE EXPLAINED BY BELIEF THAT A SYRIAN PRESENCE WILL HAVE FAR-REACHING MILITARY CONSEQUENCES:

--A SMALL SYRIAN OR OTHER ARAB PACIFICATION FORCE, WITHOUT THE HEAVY WEAPONS AND MATERIEL REQUIRED TO WAGE A MAJOR WAR, WOULD NOT POSE ANY APPRECIABLE DANGER TO ISRAEL BY SIMPLY MOVING INTO TYRE AND NABATIYA.

--SUCH A MOVE WOULD BENEFIT ISRAEL BY CUTTING OFF PALESTINIAN FORCES ALREADY IN SOUTH LEBANON FROM FURTHER SUPPLY. IT MIGHT ALSO ALLOW THE ASF TO BEGIN TO COLLECT THE PALESTINIANS' HEAVY WEAPONS.

--A FURTHER EXTENSION OF SYRIAN FORCES INTO  
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LEBANON WOULD TIE DOWN EVEN MORE FIRMLY FORCES THAT WOULD OTHERWISE BE AVAILABLE FOR THE CRUCIAL GOLAN FRONT. ANY SYRIAN OFFENSIVE ACTION AGAINST ISRAEL THROUGH LEBANON COULD EASILY BE HELD AND WOULD-BE EXPOSED TO A POTENTIALLY DEVASTATING COUNTER-ATTACK BY ISRAELI FORCES STRIKING FOR DAMASCUS THROUGH UNDERMANNED SYRIAN POSITIONS ON THE GOLAN.

THE ISRAELI POSITION, THEREFORE, APPEARS TO BE BASED ON LARGER POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS RATHER THAN ON RELATIVE MILITARY ADVANTAGE.

5. THE ISRAELI VIEW OF THE SITUATION IN LEBANON HAS BEEN

AND CONTINUES TO BE AMBIVALENT. ALTHOUGH ISRAELIS WELCOME THE SEVERE SETBACKS SUFFERED BY THE PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT AT SYRIAN HANDS, THEY ARE LOATH TO SEE THEIR SYRIAN ENEMY GAIN POLITICAL ADVANTAGE. AT THE VERY LEAST, ISRAEL BENEFITS BY A CONTINUATION OF TURMOIL IN LEBANON; IT PREOCCUPIES THE SYRIANS, THREATENS RENEWED INTER-ARAB DISPUTES, AND ALLOWS THE ISRAELIS TO MAINTAIN A "CORDON SANITAIRE" OF FRIENDLY LEBANESE CHRISTIAN MILITIA FORCES ALONG THE BOUNDARY WITH LEBANON.

6. BEYOND THAT, SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION TO THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR, TOWARDS WHICH THE PACIFICATION OF SOUTH LEBANON BY THE ASF WOULD BE A MAJOR STEP, WOULD HAVE THE RESULT OF FURTHER BOOSTING ASAD'S PRESTIGE AND INFLUENCE IN THE ARAB WORLD, WHILE REMOVING THE MAJOR CAUSE OF ARAB DISUNITY SINCE SINAI II. IT WOULD ALSO RESULT IN BRINGING THE PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT UNDER GREATER SYRIAN INFLUENCE, THUS HELPING TO OVERCOME THE MAJOR OBSTACLE TO THE FORMATION OF A COMMON FRONT OF EGYPT, SAUDI ARABIA, JORDAN, AND SYRIA, WITH PALESTINIAN ACQUIESCENCE, THAT COULD PRESS FOR EARLY NEGOTIATIONS IN GENEVA FOR A COMPREHENSIVE ARAB-ISRAELI SETTLEMENT. ISRAEL'S CURRENT EXTENSIVE, IF BELATED, PUBLIC RELATIONS RESPONSE TO THE ARAB "PEACE OFFENSIVE" DEMONSTRATES THAT THE ISRAELI LEADERSHIP IS SENSITIVE TO THE RISK, PARTICULARLY IN THE KEY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE US, POSED BY A COMMON ARAB FRONT PRESSURING FOR A SETTLEMENT ON TERMS THAT  
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ISRAEL CONSIDERS HIGHLY UNFAVORABLE.

7. SYRIAN INTENTIONS: DESPITE THE SIZABLE SYRIAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN LEBANON, THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT THE SYRIANS ARE ATTEMPTING TO ESTABLISH A NEW MILITARY FRONT WITH ISRAEL ALONG THE LEBANESE-ISRAELI BORDER. RATHER, THE SYRIANS APPEAR TO BE WELL AWARE OF THE RISKS POSED BY THE DRAWDOWN OF THEIR FORCES ON THE GOLAN IN ORDER TO PACIFY LEBANON. INDEED, ASAD PROBABLY WOULD USE THE OPPORTUNITY PROVIDED BY PACIFICATION OF SOUTH LEBANON TO THIN OUT HIS FORCES IN LEBANON AND TO RETURN THE EXCESS TO THE GOLAN FRONT.

8. ASAD'S INTENTION IN LEBANON ESSENTIALLY HAS BEEN TO PREVENT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A GOVERNMENT OF HOSTILE AND RADICAL LEBANESE LEFTISTS AND PALESTINIANS ON HIS WESTERN FLANK. THAT IS WHY HE DID NOT EMBRACE THE LEFT LAST SPRING AS THE ISRAELIS FIRST FEARED HE WOULD. A CONCOMITANT OBJECTIVE SINCE LAST MARCH, WHEN ASAD WROTE OFF ARAFAT AS UNRELIABLE, HAS BEEN TO BRING THE PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT UNDER GREATER SYRIAN INFLUENCE.

9. SINCE THE RIYADH CONFERENCE UNDERWROTE HIS OBJECTIVES

AND ACHIEVED A SYRIAN-EGYPTIAN RECONCILIATION UNDER SAUDI SPONSORSHIP, ASAD HAS BEEN ABLE TO RELATE HIS EARLIER GOALS IN LEBANON TO THE LARGER OBJECTIVE OF AN ARAB-ISRAELI SETTLEMENT WHICH WOULD RETURN THE GOLAN HEIGHTS TO SYRIA. ASAD'S SETTLEMENT STRATEGY INCLUDES ASSURING SYRIA'S PREDOMINANCE, AMONG THE ARABS, ON THE EASTERN FRONT. LEBANON AND THE PALESTINIANS WOULD BE INFLUENCED BY THE PRESENCE OF SYRIAN FORCES IN LEBANON, WHILE SYRIA WOULD BE THE MORE THAN EQUAL PARTNER IN A JORDANIAN-SYRIAN FEDERATION. TOGETHER WITH EGYPT AND SAUDI ARABIA, SYRIA WOULD THEN HAVE BROUGHT TOGETHER THE ARAB PARTICIPANTS ESSENTIAL FOR A NEW MIDDLE EAST NEGOTIATION.

10. ALTHOUGH LEBANON IS LIKELY TO REMAIN A DE FACTO SYRIAN PROTECTORATE FOR A CONSIDERABLE TIME TO COME, ASAD HAS SHOWN NO INDICATION OF WANTING TO AGGRAVATE INTERNAL TENSIONS IN SYRIA BY TRYING TO ANNEX FRACTIOUS  
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LEBANON. RATHER, HE APPEARS TO BE CONTENT WITH PROVIDING THE SECURITY FRAMEWORK WITHIN WHICH THE SARKIS REGIME COULD STABILIZE LEBANON AND CARRY OUT THE REFORMS THAT ARE NEEDED TO ENSURE FUTURE PARTICIPATION BY ALL MAJOR POLITICAL ELEMENTS.

11. SUCH AN ARRANGEMENT, IN OUR VIEW, POSES NO APPRECIABLE MILITARY DANGER TO ISRAEL. ON THE CONTRARY, IT PROMISES TO REDUCE MARKEDLY THE RISK OF FEDAYEEN TERRORIST ATTACK.

12. THE REAL ISRAELI CONCERN: NONE OF THE REASONS ADVANCED AT DIFFERENT TIMES BY VARIOUS ISRAELIS FOR THEIR CONCERN OVER SYRIAN PRESENCE IN SOUTHERN LEBANON -- AS CONTRASTED TO THEIR PRESENCE FARTHER NORTH -- SEEMS ENTIRELY LOGICAL OR SUFFICIENT IN ITSELF.

12. IT IS REASONABLE THAT IF ISRAEL FORESAW MILITARY ACTIONS OF ITS OWN AGAINST PALESTINIANS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON, IT WOULD PREFER NOT TO ENCOUNTER SYRIAN FORCES. THE ISRAELIS MUST REALIZE, HOWEVER, THAT THE SYRIANS COULD HARDLY STAND BY ONLY A FEW KILOMETERS AWAY AND ALLOW THIS TO HAPPEN, AT LEAST NOT MORE THAN ONCE, WITHOUT SERIOUS LOSS OF PRESTIGE.

13. THE ISRAELIS HAVE, IN ANY CASE, MOST RECENTLY STRESSED WHAT THEY TERMED THE LONG TERM STRATEGIC DANGER OF THE NEW POLITICAL AND MILITARY FACT THAT WOULD BE REPRESENTED BY A SYRIAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN SOUTHERN LEBANON. MILITARILY, HOWEVER, AS WE HAVE POINTED OUT, A LIMITED SYRIAN PRESENCE IN THE TYRE/NABATIYA AREAS

WOULD NOT POSE A SUBSTANTIALLY GREATER THREAT THAN SYRIAN

FORCES ALREADY POSE A FEW KILOMETERS FARTHER NORTH.

14. POLITICALLY, IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE THAT ISRAEL WOULD NOT WISH TO SEE SYRIA CEMENT A UNITED EASTERN NEGOTIATING FRONT UNDER ITS EFFECTIVE CONTROL. THAT SYRIAN SUCCESS, COUPLED WITH THE SAUDI-BACKED EGYPTIAN-SYRIAN RECONCILIATION, THREATENS TO WIPE OUT WHAT ISRAEL TRIED TO ACHIEVE IN THE SINAI II AGREEMENT -- TAKE EGYPT OUT OF THE WAR AND LEAVE SYRIA WEAK AND ISOLATED. TO SECRET

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THE CONTRARY, ASAD IS GRADUALLY SUCCEEDING IN THE STRATEGY HE ADVOCATED THROUGHOUT 1975 -- ASSURING A COMMON ARAB FRONT. THE PROBLEM AGAIN ARISES WITH THIS EXPLANATION FOR ISRAEL'S POLICY: WHY THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SYRIANS IN SIDON AND SYRIANS IN TYRE? IN FACT, IF CONSOLIDATION OF A NEW NEGOTIATING FRONT IS WHAT BOTHERS ISRAEL, WHY DO THE FEW KILOMETERS OF SOUTHERN LEBANON SEEM SIGNIFICANT AT ALL, SO LONG AS SYRIA CONTROLS THE POPULATION CENTERS OF LEBANON AND LEBANESE POLICY? -- -- --

15. THE ANSWER PROBABLY IS THAT THERE IS A MIXTURE OF MOTIVES; THAT THE ISRAELIS DO WANT A FREE HAND MILITARILY IN SOUTHERN LEBANON; THAT THEY DO WANT A BUFFER AGAINST FUTURE SYRIAN PRESSURE FROM THE NORTH AND, REALIZING THAT FOR A BUFFER ZONE A LINE HAS TO BE DRAWN SOMEWHERE, HAVE DRAWN IT AT THE LITANI, AS THEY HAVE IN THE PAST; AND, FINALLY, THAT THEY SEE A GENUINE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE IN THE COMPLETE CONSOLIDATION OF SYRIAN CONTROL AND INFLUENCE ALONG THEIR WHOLE EASTERN AND NORTHERN BORDER, A CONSOLIDATION THAT WOULD BE LESS A CAUSE OF REAL CONCERN IF IT DID NOT INCLUDE THE LEBANESE BORDER AREAS. - - - --

16. THE ISSUE IS HOW TO MEET GENUINE ISRAELI CONCERNS WITHOUT BLOCKING THE PACIFICATION OF LEBANON AND CONSOLIDATION OF CENTRAL LEBANESE AUTHORITY. IF THE ISRAELIS, AS THEY NOW SAY, ARE PRIMARILY CONCERNED ABOUT THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE SYRIAN PRESENCE, THERE ARE TWO CONCE VABLE WAYS OF EXTENDING SARKIS' CONTROL IN THE SOUTH WITHOUT THREAT: USE NON-SYRIAN ARAB SECURITY FORCE ELEMENTS -- WHICH WOULD NOT BE AS EFFECTIVE AS SYRIANS -- OR PUT SMALL SYRIAN UNITS INTO TYRE (AND NABATIYA) WITH AN EXPLICIT UNDERTAKING BY SARKIS TO REPLACE ASF TROOPS, WHETHER SYRIAN OR NON-SYRIAN, WITHIN A SPECIFIED PERIOD WITH THE LEBANESE FORCES HE INTENDS TO ORGANIZE. THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS FORCE, HOWEVER, IS LIKELY TO TAKE SEVERAL MONTHS. UNLESS SOME SUCH STEP

IS TAKEN, THE NET EFFECT OF BLOCKING THE PACIFICATION OF SOUTHERN LEBANON WILL BE THE CONSOLIDATION OF

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PALESTINIAN POSITIONS THERE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR  
RENEWED PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI WARFARE ACROSS THAT BORDER  
WITH COMPLICATING EFFECTS ON THE PEACE PROCESS. ROBINSON

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